

HE HAS ESCAPED FROM SLAVERY IGNATIUS SANCHO (C. 1729-1780)



Whereas Horace Walpole's birth gives him a place in the highest rank of society, his contemporary Ignatius Sancho is fortunate that his origin does not doom him to an existence barely human. Born into slavery on the Atlantic passage about 1729, he is carried in boyhood to England by his owner and given to three spinster sisters in Greenwich, who desire to keep him ignorant and subservient. By great good luck, he encounters the second Duke of Montagu, who recognizes his high intelligence and promotes his education. Eventually he flees from the Greenwich sisters and enters the service of the Montagu family as their butler. While there, he marries, in 1748, a black woman named Ann Osborne, who bears him seven children. He also has his portrait painted by Gainsborough. By 1773, he has become too corpulent and too gout-stricken to perform his duties, so the new Duke, the son-in-law of his first patron, helps to establish him as a retail grocer in London, a role in which he remains till his death in 1780. As a city ratepayer, he is in the enfranchised minority, and one day in the year of his death, he spends four and a half hours at the hustings, where Charles James Fox personally thanks him for his vote. A few of his surviving letters belong to the time he is still in service, but the great majority come from his last seven years.

Kindness and piety are the outstanding characteristics of this sweet-natured man, but beneath the rather bland surface is a passion for good literature and the theatre and for fine preaching, and a mind that can venture into irony and satire. At times, he writes pleasing verse and composes music. Among his many friends and acquaintances are John Meheux, a young man with literary and artistic ambitions; the actors David Garrick and John Henderson; the bookbinder John Wingrave and his son Jack; the artist John Hamilton Mortimer; and his former fellow servants—Charles Browne, James Kisbee, Mrs. H—, and Roger Rush—with whom he always remains

in close contact. He corresponds with Laurence Sterne, who responds to his request for an exposure of West Indian slavery by introducing a once persecuted black girl into the last volume of *Tristram Shandy*.

As a black man in England, Sancho encounters both good will and prejudice. He is delighted with John Meheux's answer to an ugly appeal in the *Morning Chronicle* asking the Prime Minister to reduce or end the presence of blacks in London, and when he receives anti-slavery books from Philadelphia, he longs for every Member of Parliament and the King himself to read just one of them. "Commerce," he says, "was meant by the goodness of the Deity to diffuse the various goods of the earth into every part," but it has been perverted to create this abominable institution. Praising compassionate treatment of his "poor black brethren," he declares, "my soul melts at kindness – but the contrary – I own with shame – makes me almost a savage." Yet he is magnanimous enough to be understanding when the young Jack Wingrave fears he may forfeit his respect because European society in India will not allow him to associate openly with the two Africans Sancho has recommended to his attention. He idolises Sterne for the latter's exaltation of the benevolent heart both in *Tristram Shandy* and in his sermons, and he picks up from this author the habit of punctuating his writing mostly with dashes.

People who suffer from belonging to a sometimes despised minority are not immune from the troubles to which everyone is vulnerable. In addition to his race, Sancho suffers in the 1770s from the deaths of three of his children and from agonizing attacks of gout. Having "a large family and small finances," he is never able to escape from painful poverty. During the American war, his business, like many others, does not prosper. "Trade," he tells Mrs. H–, "is at so low an ebb, the greatest are glad to see ready money." A number of letters express grateful thanks for presents of flesh, fruit, wine, and, in one case, snuff.

Presents are pleasing, but what upholds Sancho throughout all his troubles is his sustaining faith. Many times he casts his mind forward "from corruptible pleasure – to immortal and incorruptible life – happiness without end – and past all human comprehension." Though he is convinced that in this world Providence rules and "nothing happens by chance," he is eager to transcend the realm of daily life through prayers and sermons. After he listens several times to the preaching of Erasmus Middleton, "one of those five who were expelled from Oxford," he deems himself "half a Methodist." Equally moved by one of the letters of Cardinal Valenti (later Pope Clement XIV) that has "every thing in it which St. Paul had in his heart," he feels it "would almost turn me to the Romish." The Anglican Church, however, remains his spiritual home. After praising the Rev. Richard Harrison for the "animated strength of devotion in his Litany,"

which “almost carries the heart to the gates of Heaven,” he declares, “if H[arrison] reads prayers, and D[odd] preaches at the same church—I should suppose greater perfection could not be found in England.” Not surprisingly, he is for complete religious toleration, and, in keeping with this, he believes “Heaven big enough for all the race of man” and exults that there “We will mix ... with all countries, colours, faiths.” He doubts the doctrine of “eternal Damnation.”

Despite his piety, he is alert to the perversions of religion, and he observes “among the modern Saints—who profess to pray without ceasing—that they are so fully taken up with pious meditations—and so wholly absorbed in the love of God—that they have little if any room for the love of man.” Conscience he regards as “the high chancellor of the human breast,” and he asserts, “One ounce of practical religion is worth all that ever the Stoics wrote.” In a letter to Miss Lydia Leach, the godmother of his son Billy, he addresses her as, “You, who believe in the true essence of the gospel—who visit the sick, cover the naked, and withdraw not your ear from the unfortunate.”

Sancho’s faith finds an outlet in moralizing, especially to men, both black and white, and younger than himself. He ladles out generous portions of his counsel to a number of these: John Meheux, an amateur artist; Jack Wingrave, who is working in India; Julius Soubise, a black protégé of the Duchess of Queensberry; and Charles Lincoln, a black musician. His main admonitions are to avoid bad company, shun temptation, achieve respect and prosperity through honesty and hard work, and improve mind and morals by reading the Bible and good secular literature.

When Sancho ventures to write to Sterne, the living author he most admires, he informs him, “My chief pleasure has been books.” Fiction, poetry, and history are his delight. Unlike Johnson, he appreciates both Richardson and Fielding. Defending Sterne from a charge of stealing from Fielding, he instructs John Meheux—calling him “thou criticizing jack ape”—that “Fielding and Sterne both copied Nature—their pallettes stored with proper colours of the brightest dye.” Although “Human Nature” was their common subject, “their colouring was widely different” and at the most, “*here* and there some features in each might bear a little resemblance.” A lover of poetry, he constantly quotes Pope and recommends to young readers whose “stomachs are strong enough for such intellectual food” Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Young’s *Night Thoughts*, and *The Seasons* of James Thomson; these books, he tells Jack Wingrave, have been his “summer companions for near twenty years.” Recommending *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V* by William Robertson to a former fellow servant, he advises him to read the demanding first volume very attentively as it will make the second more intelligible.

His devotion to British literature is an important strand in one-half of the twofold identity that Sancho experiences, as do most members of ethnic and religious minorities. Writing of how five English warships, badly outnumbered by French vessels, eventually withdrew, he proudly claims, "We fought like Englishmen"; in the same letter, he concedes, "I am only a lodger." Despite this reservation, he is fiercely loyal to the Royal Family crediting the monarch and his consort with "every virtue" and grieving that George III is "beset with friends – which he ought to fear." The King's popular opponent John Wilkes he stigmatizes in 1778 as "the late great Dagon of the people."

During the conflict with the American colonies, Sancho's views resemble those of Horace Walpole. It is "a detestable Brother's [*sic*] war – where the right hand is hacking and hewing the left" and "their madness" matches "our cruelty and injustice." When peace prevails, "America will be the grand patron of genius"; meanwhile "the eyes of our rulers are shut – and their judgements stone-blind." In 1780, when Charleston falls to Sir Henry Clinton, no scruples prevent Sancho from sharing in the patriotic rejoicing over the victory as he records how "the Tower and Park guns confirmed it – the guards encamped in the parks fired each a grand *feu de joye*" even as he recognizes that "tonight we blaze in illuminations – and to-morrow get up as poor and discontented as ever."

Like Walpole, Sancho grieves over what he sees as a nation in decline – an England whose empire is disintegrating while its newspapers print lies and even its church is sick. "Oh, this poor ruined country!" he laments, judging it to be "ruined by victories – arts – arms – and unbounded commerce – for pride accompanied those blessings." He looks back fondly to "the glorious time of George II and a Pitt's administration," when Britain triumphed in the Seven Years War. Now,

religion and morality are vanished with our prosperity – every good principle seems to be leaving us: – as our means lessen, luxury and every sort of expensive pleasure increases. – The blessed Sabbath-day is used by the trader for country excursions – tavern-dinners – rural walks – and then whipping and galloping through dust and over turnpikes drunk home. – The poorer sort do any thing – but go to church.... And for the upper tiptop high life – cards and music are called in to dissipate the chagrin of a tiresome, tedious Sunday's evening.

Nevertheless Sancho hopes that with a return to peace a restored Britain will be "as heretofore the nurse of freedom!" He does not live to see the end of the American war, but he witnesses from his shop door part of the

anti-Catholic Gordon riots. “There is at this present moment,” he reports to his banker friend John Spink of Bury St. Edmunds,

at least a hundred thousand poor, miserable, ragged rabble, from twelve to sixty years of age, with blue cockades in their hats—besides half as many women and children—all parading the streets—the bridge—the park—ready for any and every mischief.—Gracious God! what’s the matter now? I was obliged to leave off—the shouts of the mob—the horrid clashing of swords—and the clutter of a multitude in swiftest motion—drew me to the door—when every one in the street was employed in shutting up shop.—It is now just five o’clock.

Subsequent letters retail what Sancho learns at secondhand, and his conclusion about the eight tragic days is that “our religion has swallowed up our charity—and the fell demon Persecution is become the sacred idol of the once free, enlightened, generous Britons.”

Long after Sancho’s death, his now aged friend the bookseller William Stevenson remarks that in his letters there is “a playfulness ... which seldom accompanies the writings of a Moralist.” Referring to his own address in Charles Street and to the Greenwich Hospital for disabled seamen, Sancho exclaims:

trust me, my M[eheux], I am resolved upon a reform.—Truth, fair Truth, I give thee to the wind!—Affection, get thee hence! Friendship, be it the idol of such silly chaps, with aching heads, strong passions, warm hearts, and happy talents, as of old used to visit Charles Street, and now abideth in fair “G[reenwich] House.

A consequence of the Wingrave family’s being “leavened with all the obsolete goodness of old times” is “that a man runs some hazard in being seen in the W[ingrave]’s society of being biassed to Christianity.”

Sancho is at home in the satirical mode in which the eighteenth century excels. Quoting a couplet of Pope’s, he asks Meheux,

how comes it that—without the advantages of a twentieth generationship of noble blood flowing uncontaminated in your veins—without the customary three years dissipation at college—and the (nothing-to-be-done without) four years perambulation on the Continent—without all these needful appendages—with little more than plain sense—sheer good nature—and a right honest heart—thou canst—

*Like low-born Allen, with an awkward shame,
Do good by stealth, and blush to find it fame.*

His ironic proposal that the shortfall in army recruitment should be made good by drafting hairdressers, “happily half-trained already for the service of their country – by being – *powder proof*,” is printed in a letter signed Africanus in the *General Advertiser* of 29 April 1778. The advantages are to be domestic, too, for

the ladies, by once more getting the management of their heads into their own hands, might possibly regain their native reason and economy – and the gentlemen might be induced by mere necessity to comb and care for their own heads – those (I mean) who have heads to care for.

Although Sancho’s letters contain only a few lively anecdotes like his account of a stagecoach journey, they introduce his readers to a range of characters. Among his correspondents, in addition to those already mentioned, are two beautiful women. Mrs. Cocksedge, who rides, walks and dances, is “lovely even in sickness,” and whose “humanity – humility – and good-will” outlast even her good looks. She is companion to “the little Syren Miss C[rewe],” to whom Sancho writes, “I want to know what conquests you have made – what savages converted – whom you have smiled into felicity, or killed by rejection.”

If the letters have a villain, it is Julius Soubise, a black man whose patron, the Duchess of Queensberry, has him trained as a riding and fencing instructor. An ill behaved youth, he sets in motion Sancho’s propensity for moralizing. At one point, he welcomes Soubise’s claim of reformation, but is shrewd enough to tell Meheux he doubts whether it will last. When Soubise is accused of raping one of her maids, the Duchess quickly has him shipped to India. Writing to Jack Wingrave, who is also there, Sancho invites him to be helpful to Soubise but warns him against “lending him money upon any account.” A few months later, a letter from Madras persuades Sancho it is the product of “a mind purged from its follies.” Another two years, however, are enough to elicit a warning to Wingrave “not to know him,” for “’tis not in the power of friendship to serve a man who will in no one instance care for himself.”

A perfect foil to Soubise is another young African, Charles Lincoln, whose career we follow as he seeks to return to England, probably from France, sails to India as a musician in the Captain’s band, and eventually returns to his native island of St. Kitts in the West Indies, where he enlists in the militia. Deeming Lincoln “honest, trusty, good-natured, and civil,” Sancho hopes his influence can benefit Soubise, whom he exhorts to cultivate the friendship of one who “will not flatter or fear you.”

Publicly talked of characters who briefly appear in Sancho's letters include the bigamous Duchess of Kingston—"tho' a bad woman," he says, "she is entitled to pity"—and Dr. Dodd, the clergyman condemned to hang for forging a signature on a bond. Joining the campaign for a reprieve, Sancho thinks Dodd, whose preaching he has loved, should be sentenced to serve as chaplain to convicts on prison ships as their fellow sinner. In the case of Jane Butterfield, accused of murdering the man who first seduced her, then lived with her, and finally cut her out of his will thinking she was poisoning him, Sancho is delighted by her acquittal. He considers she deserves substantial damages and asserts, "In my opinion, the D[uchess] of K[ingston] is honored to be mentioned in the same paper with Miss Butterfield."

A particularly endearing character in the letters is Anne Sancho, a literate woman whom her husband can take to the theatre. He writes of how her smile "twenty years ago almost bewitched me" and how even now he is apt to "assume a gaiety" to see it again. It pleases him to imagine her delight when she leaves him at the shop to enjoy a visit with their friends at Bury St. Edmunds, and he never tires of praising her goodness. On 11 March 1779, after she has sat up at night for a whole month with their dying daughter Kitty, he writes, "she has the rare felicity of possessing true virtue without arrogance—softness without weakness—and dignity without pride." Less than two years afterwards, she is tending her husband in his last illness. He dies on 14 December 1780.

Compassion and magnanimity are Sancho's outstanding qualities. His sympathies extend to the oppressed people of India (he hopes Jack Wingrave will return with "a decent competence," but not "clogged with the tears and blood of the poor natives"), to the Irish, whose trade is stifled by Britain, and to the asses he sees cruelly treated at the daily market. However, as the case of Soubise shows, he is not naively credulous about human goodness. When a woman fails to keep her promise to leave him a legacy, he is not disappointed because he never believed her. He counsels Meheux to guard his friend Nancy "from the traitor in her own fair breast, which, while it is the seat of purity and unsullied honor—fancies its neighbours to be the same." In the last year of his life, he writes of people in general, "the majority, who are composed chiefly of the narrow-minded or contracted hearts, and of selfish avidity, cannot comprehend the delight in doing as they would be done by." Seven months later, he informs Charles Lincoln, "Your friend D— tries expedients, and gets nothing;—he is very deep in my debt; but as he has nothing, I can expect nothing—for I never will consent to do that to others, I would not they should do unto me."